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ON PAGE **5-A**

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McFarlane calls aide's ties to 'contras' acceptable

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WASHINGTON — Robert C. McFarlane, the president's national security adviser, assured a Senate panel yesterday that an aide with ties to the "contra" rebels of Nicaragua did not violate a congressional ban on aid to the insurgents, but senators said they will investigate the matter further.

In addition, leaders of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which oversees the Central Intelligence Agency, said they will establish "ground rules" limiting the agency's role in the activities of the contras, now that a legislative ban on CIA involvement with the rebels is expiring.

Mr. McFarlane requested the private meeting yesterday with com-

mittee members to discuss the actions of Oliver North, a staff aide at the National Security Council. Mr. North had been linked in reports last month to private groups that collected money for the contras after Congress refused to provide military aid for the rebels.

Sens. David Durenberger, R-Minn., chairman of the panel, and Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., vice-chairman, said after the session that Mr. McFarlane had concluded that the aide did not actively solicit money for the private groups assisting the contras, nor did he offer the contras military advice as had also been alleged.

Mr. Durenberger said that Mr. McFarlane was "satisfied" that Mr. North had complied with "specific directives" from the national security adviser and the president that administration officials were not to so-

licit aid for the contras through private groups to get around the congressional ban on U.S. government aid.

Private groups sympathetic to the contras' fight against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua have raised funds, estimated from \$15 million to \$25 million, to help the rebels since Congress refused last year to continue military aid to the contras.

Mr. Leahy said panel members "hammered" on the question of whether Mr. North had helped solicit money for the private groups and were assured he had not done so.

The senators said that Mr. McFarlane agreed with them that any active role in soliciting money for the contras would violate the law.

The intelligence panel will investigate the matter further, the sena-

tors said, but they declined to say if they would summon Mr. North for testimony. "It's not a closed matter," Mr. Durenberger said.

The National Security Council became involved in contacts with the contras after Congress forbade the CIA and other intelligence agencies from providing any direct or indirect military assistance to the rebels.

Congress recently approved \$27 million in nonmilitary, humanitarian aid for the contras. An office of humanitarian assistance is being created in the State Department to distribute the funds.

The nonmilitary aid, which is supposed to be used for food, clothing and medical supplies, "does not mean that they can use a back door way to have military aid," Mr. Leahy said.